

## **Christmas Tensions by GreenLily474**

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**Summary:** Christmas 2018. Mike and Will and their families are regretting their decision to have a "Mega Christmas" with their extended family. They each have a daughter going through difficult times. Story heavily focuses on the daughters.

## Christmas Tensions

Zelda Byers sat in her closet on Christmas Day 2018 drawing on her sketch pad. Her home was filled with members of her extended family and her uncle Mike's family. Her parents and her Uncle Mike and Aunt Ellie (or El as her friends called her) had decided to try a "mega family Christmas," because they didn't really like going back to Hawkins. Zelda had the feeling that her parents and her Aunt and Uncle were regretting that decision. Her mother's family: including her (maternal) grand parents, her great great Aunt Janice and Uncle Carl, her mother's brother and sister and their children were all staying in the house. Her father's side of the family was staying with Uncle Mike and Aunt El, but everyone was at Zelda's home for Christmas dinner. It was about 40 people total.

Zelda wasn't exactly having the greatest Christmas. It had started when she pulled away from her Uncle Carl and Aunt Janice's wet kisses. They said that it was just the way they showed affection. They had acted hurt, but her parents stood up for her. Her mother got angry when Aunt Janice said Zelda was acting like a spoiled brat. Then, Aunt Janice had put Zelda's cat Artemis outside in the middle of the night. Artemis could have gotten lost or frozen to death. Zelda had angrily screamed "I hate you!" at Aunt Janice. Grandma Mason had tried to get her to apologize to Aunt Janice and wear the dress that she (Aunt Janice) had gotten her (Zelda) for Christmas (she'd worn it to church the night before and it was very uncomfortable.) Fortunately for Zelda, her parents refused to make her apologize to Aunt Janice until Aunt Janice apologized for putting Zelda's cat in danger.

Zelda felt out of place with all the people in her house. At eight years old, she was considerably younger than her siblings and all of her cousins. Her sister Veronica was eight years older than her and her brother Mikey was eleven when she was born. They had a bet going on whether Zelda would be a boy or a girl. Mikey had wanted to be Mommy's only special boy and Veronica wanted to be Daddy's only little girl- though she told Zelda that she didn't mind sharing their Daddy with such a cool little sister. Zelda enjoyed spending time with her parents (who had often told her that she was their little miracle

because Mommy had gotten very sick after Veronica was born and didn't think she'd ever have any more children), but they were in the kitchen talking to her aunts and uncles and her oldest cousin Barbara at the moment, and she didn't want to bother them. Uncle Mike's sister Holly's daughters Emily and Madison were the only children close to Zelda's age, but they were playing a two person game. Zelda considered sitting with Grandma Joyce and Grandpa Hopper, but they were in the living room with all of the really old people, including Uncle Mike's parents and Aunt Janice and Uncle Carl (both Grandma Joyce and Grandpa Hopper would have preferred Zelda's company). When Zelda checked on her older brother Mikey, he was watching *The Night Before* (which was rated R) with her cousins Bill and Gage (Uncle Mike and Aunt El's sons) and David and Keith (Uncle Jonathan and Aunt Nancy's sons). Her sister Veronica was having a private conversation with her cousins Jo and Molly (Uncle Mike and Aunt El's daughters) and Susie and Carissa (Aunt Sara and Uncle Kyle's daughters) because Jo and her friend Katie (who was now living with Aunt El and Uncle Mike because her parents were mean) were upset about something.

Zelda heard her dog Luna whimpering outside her closet door. She opened the door and let her in, then sat back down to work on her drawings. She'd been drawing certain things for months. Her father had told her the biggest family secret on her eighth birthday. To the world, Zelda's Aunt El was Jane Hopper, the adopted daughter of Grandpa Hopper and her father and Uncle Jonathan's step sister. The truth was that Aunt El was Zelda's father's twin sister who was stolen from her Grandma Joyce by bad people when she was born. She had escaped from the lab and helped Uncle Mike and their friends Dustin and Lucas find her father when he got trapped in a place called the Upside Down for a week. The bad people who had taken Aunt El were gone, but there were still plenty of bad people out there. Zelda, Mikey and Veronica all had abilities as did their cousins on their father's side. It was all because of an accident Grandma Joyce had when she was a kid. They had to keep their abilities a secret. Aunt Sara and her kids had abilities too because the bad people had experimented on Grandpa Hopper when he was in the army. Zelda had the same abilities as her father: she could make herself invisible, redirect sunlight to make plants grow and make portals (though her family asked her not to try to last one).

A knock on her closet door shook her from her thoughts. She remained quiet as she didn't feel like speaking to most of the people in the house. There was an advantage in that the people she was trying to avoid were unaware that she could make herself invisible.

"Zelda?"

"Are you alone?" asked Zelda.

"I'm alone."

"Promise?"

"I promise."

"You may enter, then."

The closet door opened and Zelda's father Will Byers was standing above her. "Hey there, Pumpkin," said Will. "Your Aunt El said she thought you were upset about something." Zelda liked the fact that her father never played games like her friends' parents often did.

"Was she looking for me in her head again?" asked Zelda as she rolled her eyes.

"She worries. She's been doing that to me for over thirty years. I don't think she can help herself." Will closed the door and sat on the floor across from his youngest child. "It's pretty crowded in this house today, isn't it?"

Zelda shrugged and continued drawing. "Do I have to eat dinner with everyone today? Please don't make me." Tears started to stream from Zelda's face. Will recognized his daughter's behavior and her anxiety about being around so many people. He didn't have big family gatherings when he was little. It had always been just him, his mother and Jonathan for the longest time, but he had often felt awkward at big social events. He had the feeling that something else was on Zelda's mind.

"I won't make you eat with everyone else today."

"You won't?"

"Nope. Your Aunt Janice and Uncle Carl are a couple of jerks who think they can get away with being jerks because they're really old."

"Is that off the record, Daddy?"

"That's *very* off the record," said Will as he winked at Zelda. "Your mother agrees, but her agreement is off the record as well."

Zelda nodded, but didn't crack a smile. That concerned Will.

"What's on your mind, munchkin?" Will asked. Zelda lifted her eyes from her drawing and considered her father carefully.

"Wh-what if I have a twin brother. I mean, the doctors made you leave the room when they cut open Mom's stomach to take me out. What if they made you leave because they were taking my twin brother like they took Aunt El from Grandma Joyce when she was born."

"Zelda-"

"Daddy, I'm serious! Gage and Jo are twins, so it runs in the family. Bad people could have my twin brother! We have to save him!"

"Hey, now, if you had a twin brother and bad people had him, your mother and I would be doing everything we could to save him, and we wouldn't be doing it alone. Your Aunt El, your Uncle Mike, Uncle Jonathan, Aunt Sara, Grandma Joyce, Grandpa Hopper, all of us would be doing everything we could to find him."

"But what if you just don't know about him. Grandma Joyce didn't know about Aunt El."

"It was a different time. Your Grandma Joyce couldn't afford Ultra sounds. Your mom got plenty of those when she was pregnant with you. We wanted to make sure you were okay."

"But the doctors who did them could have been bad people and lied to you and Mom!"

"Sure they could have, and if they were bad people, they certainly would have lied to us. Your Grandma Joyce had maternal instincts

and always knew something had happened when I was born. She told me that before I knew you Aunt El was my sister. Your mother had good maternal instincts as well and she didn't have that same bad feeling when you were born. Your Aunt El was also checking on you in her head when your mother was pregnant with you. She taught Veronica and Jo to do the same. Even if we couldn't trust the doctors, we could trust your sister, your aunt and your cousin."

"Okay," said Zelda in a voice that was barely above a whisper. She focused on her drawing. Will's heart broke for his daughter. Lonnie left the family when Will was Zelda's age. He and Jonathan coped by building Castle Byers. They were far apart enough in age that they never had a typical sibling rivalry, and close enough in age that they could enjoy doing things together. Zelda didn't have any sort of sibling rivalry with Mikey or Veronica. She was so much younger that she didn't *have* to share anything with them, but they age different also meant that she didn't really *get* to share anything with them.

"Dad?" Zelda pulled a folder out of one of the boxes and handed it to him. Will opened it up. It was filled with short stories about a pair of twins. There was a boy named Edmund-the same as Will's grandfather who passed away shortly before he and El were born. Will read the stories for a few minutes.

"Zelda, these are amazing!" said Will.

"But they aren't real," said Zelda. Will crawled over to his daughter and pulled her into a hug, just as his mother had done so many times for him when he was her age. Joyce often had to work long hours when she was a single mother and couldn't spend as much time with her children as she wanted, but Will always knew that she loved him. He wanted Zelda to always know the same.

"No, they aren't real, but you are, and you're pretty amazing," said Will. His affection for his children, particularly Zelda who was the most like him made Will really understand his mother and her actions when he was a child. He had mostly gotten over his PTSD as the years went by, but it returned in full force when he became a father. The idea of his children experiencing the kinds of horrors that he and his sister had experienced frightened him way more than going through it himself again. "How about I text Mr. and Mrs.

Beckett and see if Cassie can come over after dinner?" Zelda nodded her consent and Will pulled his phone out of his pocket and sent the text. Cassie was as close to Zelda as Mike was to Will.

"Hey," said Julie softly as she opened the closet door. She noticed her crying daughter. "Well, um dinner's ready, but you don't have to come down if you don't want to, Zelda."

"I'm sorry I caused Grandma Mason and Aunt Janice to criticize you about being too easy on me," said Zelda as she looked up from Will's shoulder.

"Don't worry about that, Zelda. Your Grandma and Grandpa Mason raised me, your Aunt Tina, and Uncle Brian they way they thought was best and now your father and I are raising you they way we think is best. As for your Aunt Janice..."

"She and Uncle Carl are jerks who think they can get away with being jerks because they're old," said Zelda. "But that's off the record."

Julie glanced at Will who shrugged apologetically. Julie tried not to smile. They had always tried to not speak poorly of other people in front of their children, but Aunt Janice and Uncle Carl had been pushing their buttons. They had both been continually complaining about how disrespectful and entitled the youngest generation was, yet seemed to think that everyone was supposed to do what they wanted them to do and the fact that Aunt Janice had put Zelda's cat outside in the freezing cold in the middle of the night showed disrespect for the rules Will and Julie had in their own home. "Just remember, Zelda, no matter how old you get, always respect the rules people have when you visit their home. You don't want to ever make anyone feel the way your Aunt Janice and Uncle Carl have been making us feel," said Julie. There, teachable moment.

"Your mother's absolutely right," said Will as he winked at Julie. "She's so smart."

"Can I sit with you two at dinner?" asked Zelda.

"Of course you can," said Will.

"Knock, knock," Holly Wheeler (Now Witzman) was standing in the doorway of Zelda's room with Emily and Madison. The three Byers all stood up.

"Hey, Holly," said Will. "What's up?"

"Emily and Madison just had something to say to Zelda," said Holly as she nudged her daughters forward.

"We're sorry we didn't let you play with us," said Emily. Zelda put her hands in her pockets and stared at the floor.

"That's okay," said Zelda hoarsely. Holly gave Madison a little nudge. Madison groaned and rolled her eyes.

"I'm sorry I said your name was stupid."

Will and Julie exchanged a nervous look. Naming their youngest child after a character in a video game they'd loved playing together since they were teenagers had seemed like a good idea when she was a newborn... Zelda noticed the looks on her parents' faces.

"It doesn't matter," said Zelda. "I like my name."

"You can play with us after dinner," said Emily.

Zelda shook her head. "No thanks. I'm going to work on my stories."

"Are you sure about that, Zelda?" asked Julie. "It might be fun."

"Mom, they don't really want to play with me. It's not fun being around people who don't want me around!"

Julie opened her mouth to reply, but Veronica and Mikey entered the room. "Hey, Zelda, we're really sorry about earlier," said Mikey. "We didn't mean to make you feel left out."

Zelda shook her head and stared harder at her feet. Her face turned bright red.

"It's just that Jo and Katie are really going through something now," said Veronica.



"You don't have to try to explain it to me," said Zelda. "I'm not stupid!"

"We know you aren't stupid," said Mikey. He walked over and handed her a small plastic bowl filled with mint chocolate bells. Here, got you your favorite Christmas candy." Zelda glared at the bowl. She suddenly threw it on the floor.

"Stop treating me like a baby and LEAVE ME ALONE!"

Alright, everyone, let's get down to dinner," said Julie. She turned to Zelda. "Pick that candy up before Luna eats it."

"I'm sorry, Mom," said Zelda as she hastily began to pick up the bells. Mikey and Veronica started to help, but Julie held out her hand and gestured for them to leave. They obeyed their mother. Julie knelt down and took Zelda's shoulders.

"Hey, Munchkin, I'm not mad at you. You were upset and you had every right to tell people they were upsetting you, but you can't throw things. People can get hurt. Understand?" Zelda nodded and Julie kissed her forehead.

"There's a lot of people waiting to eat. Go ahead and tell them to get started. I'll be down in a bit," said Will. Julie nodded and squeezed his hand. She closed Zelda's bedroom door behind her. Will and Zelda carefully searched under the dresser and bed to make sure there weren't any loose pieces of candy.

"Dad, I'm tired," said Zelda. "Is it okay if I just take a nap?"

"That's fine, Pumpkin," said Will. "I'll save a seat for you if you feel like coming down later."

"Okay," said Zelda. "I'm sorry if I ruined Christmas. I know I'm supposed to make the most of my time with Grandma and Grandpa Mason and Aunt Janice and Uncle Carl and everyone else..."

"That's just as much on them as it is on you, Zelda. All you can do is try, but they need to try too." Will's phone buzzed and he checked it. "Looks like Cassie can come over in a couple hours, do you still want that?" Zelda nodded. Will replied to the text. "I'll see you in a little

bit."

Zelda sat quietly in her room with Luna, Artemis, and a mother cat with a litter of kittens that her family was fostering. After about 45 minutes, she decided to go downstairs. She hoped that her father's side of the family was sitting near her parents as she felt more comfortable with them. She stopped in the living room as she heard and argument in the dining room.

"We're losing values in this country," Zelda heard her uncle Carl saying. "Now they've gone and redefined marriage."

"It's that political correctness," said Uncle Mike's dad Ted Wheeler.

"Can we change the subject?" Zelda heard Uncle Mike ask.

"We're just expressing our opinions, Michael," said Ted.

"They aren't just opinions, Dad," said Mike angrily.

"People are too easily offended these days," said Uncle Carl. "Just because you don't like what we're saying, doesn't mean it isn't true."

Zelda noticed her cousin Jo and Jo's friend Katie looking very uncomfortable. Her aunt El was glaring at Uncle Carl and Ted Wheeler like she was imagining their heads exploding.

"Just because you're a couple of old bigots with your heads up your asses doesn't mean it is true," Veronica spat. She clearly noticed how uncomfortable Jo and Katie were.

"Language!" said Ted Wheeler.

"I was speaking plain English!" said Veronica sarcastically.

"A fine job you and that husband of yours are doing teaching your children respect," said Aunt Janice to Julie. "One daughter is pouting in her room because she didn't get her way and the other is talking back to my husband and Mr. Wheeler."

Julie let her fork slide from her hand. "You and you husband are in no place to lecture my children about respect, Aunt Janice. You've

done nothing but insult every aspect of our lives since you got to OUR house."

"Julie!" said Mrs. Mason. "You don't have much time life with them, make it nice."

"We've, all been trying, Mom," said Julie. "But, I'm not going to sit back and let them insult my family just because they're old."

"We're not insulting your family, we're just telling the truth, stop being so sensitive," said Uncle Carl. "And if Veronica is one of those allies to fags and dykes-" his plate of food had suddenly spilled down his front. Will glanced at his sister. El gave a slight shrug. Jo stood up and and started to leave. Katie followed.

"Jo, wait!" said Mike.

"We need some fresh air, dad. We'll be fine."

"Jo, it's Christmas," said Karen Wheeler.

"Some people in this room aren't really acting like it, Grandma," said Jo. "Sorry Uncle Will and Aunt Julie. Dinner was great. We just don't feel good right now." Jo and Katie took their plates to the kitchen and put them in the sinks. They grabbed their coats to sit on the back porch.

"It's really cold outside," said Zelda. "You guys can hide in my room if you want to get away from everyone." Jo looked at Zelda then glanced out the window at the window at the snow covered backyard. She exchanged a look with Katie.

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"Looks like we make the right choice, Jo," said Katie as she picked up a couple of the foster kittens.

Zelda sat on her bed drawing in her sketchbook while Jo and Katie sat on bean bags and held the kittens. "Sorry about Uncle Carl and Aunt Janice. Dad said they think they can get away with being jerks because they're old, but that's 'off the record.'"

Jo and Katie chuckled. "That's alright, Zel. It's not your fault," said Jo. "They have to be really bad if your Dad's calling them jerks."

"Mom told me we should never make anyone feel like they make people feel," said Zelda.

"She'd right too," said Jo.

"Can I ask you guys something?" asked Zelda.

"Of course you can," said Katie. Zelda took a deep breath, she wasn't sure how to ask, but didn't want her cousin and Katie to feel like they had to hide something from her.

"Are-are you two a couple?" Jo and Katie exchanged a quick look. Jo hesitated.

"How did you know?"

Zelda shrugged. "Your Dad and Veronica her getting really upset about what your Grandpa Wheeler and my Uncle Carl were saying. Your mom was giving them a really dirty looks and I think she used her powers to spill Uncle Carl's food all over him-" Zelda stopped for a second. She wasn't sure if Katie knew their family's big secret. "I mean-"

"It's alright. Katie knows about us," said Jo.

"Well, anyway, Uncle Carl and Mr. Wheeler weren't talking to you, but you got up and left."

"Yeah, well, sometimes girls like each other or boys like each other just like girls and boys like each other- in a romantic way," said Jo. She cringed at her own wording.

"I know that, Jo," said Zelda. "I was a flower girl at Randy and Zack's wedding, remember?"

"Good point," said Veronica.

"Grandma and Grandpa Mason told Mom and Dad that I was too young to know about that stuff. Grandma Joyce and Grandpa said it

was silly for them to say that," said Zelda.

"Looks like your extended family won't have a problem with us-at least not on your Mom's side," said Katie. "Your Uncle Jonathan doesn't seem like the kind of person who would give a shit either-sorry, Zelda, I meant give a crap."

"That's okay, I hear worse at school," said Zelda. Jo and Katie burst out laughing. Jo stood up and walked over to Zelda. She took a seat next to her and pulled her into a hug. She looked at Zelda's sketches.

"Can I show Katie your drawings?"

"Yeah, okay," said Zelda. She felt a little nervous because her stories about the twin brother she wanted were in that book, but they had confided something very personal with her.

"You have to see her work, Katie," said Jo as Katie took a seat. "All three of my Uncle Will's kids are really good artists. You've seen what Veronica does at school, but Zelda here really inherited her father's talent."

Katie took a seat. Zelda handed her the sketch book. Jo kept her arm around Zelda and squeezed her shoulder as they watched Katie flip through the book. She began reading the story about the twins.

"Jo, this story is really good. This twins remind me of your mom and Uncle Will, except the boy was taken from his mother at birth instead of the girl," said Katie. Zelda stared at her hands. Jo must have told Katie everything.

"When Dad told me about my powers and our family...I-I thought maybe I could have a twin brother like your Mom has my Dad and you have Gage-but Dad said that you and Aunt El and Veronica were using your powers to check on me when mom was pregnant and you would have known if there was another baby."

Jo hugged her cousin again and started rubbing circles on her back. "Yeah, we definitely would have known. Mom felt super protective of you and was always checking to make sure you were alright."

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"Here," said Will as he tapped Mike on the shoulder and handed him a mug of hot chocolate. "It's freezing out here."

"I just really needed some fresh air," said Mike as he took a sip. It was a warm day for December in the greater Chicago area, but still colder than either of them liked. Will's family dogs that included two recently rescued greyhounds, and Australian Shepherd mix, and a Boxer dashed out into the yard. "I think all your pets are driving my parents and your in-laws crazy. My parents weren't too happy about the pets in my house either. They never did let me get a dog or cat when I was a kid.."

"Well, they're staying at our houses, they can get over it," said Will as he leaned on the rail and watched his dogs running around his yard happily playing.

"Sorry El and I didn't tell you about Jo and Katie. It wasn't because we didn't trust you or thought that you and Julie wouldn't accept it-"

"It's okay, Mike. It wasn't your secret to tell," said Will.

"Poor Katie's own parents kicked her out. She doesn't know who she can trust."

"She's always been a great kid. They don't deserve her," said Will. Katie has been friends with Jo and Veronica since grade school. Her parents had seemed like perfectly nice people... until they kicked out their own child.

"Why did we think a mega family Christmas was good idea?" asked Mike.

"I'm not sure we actually thought it was a good idea, we just caved to the pressure. I say we just stick to having my parents and Jonathan and Nancy over in the future, It's so much more fun that way... I'm not opposed to having Dustin and Lucas over."

"Sounds good," said Mike. He took a sip of hot chocolate and watched the dogs thoughtfully.

"What's on your mind?" asked Will.

"Just random things... like would my parents accept Jo and Katie if they found out... Sometimes I wonder if you had been gay... would they have tried to make me stop being friends with you... or if I had been gay, would they have disowned me or put me in one of those conversion therapy houses." Mike had picked up an ability to notice bigotry whether blatant or subtle after having Will, Lucas, and Dustin as friends. Lucas had to deal with racism, Dustin was constantly picked on for his lisp, and Will had to deal with rumors that he was gay. His friends being victims of cruelty was one of the things that caused him to lose his temper. Now one of his own children was a victim of cruelty. He really didn't want that cruelty to come from his own parents.

"They might surprise you," said Will. "I mean, I recommend waiting until Jo is ready before you tell them, but they might be okay with it."

"What makes you say that?" asked Mike.

"Your mom was okay with all the Byers secrets once she got used to the idea."

"That's true, I guess," said Mike. "I think my mom's a little jealous of your mom."

"What?" asked Will skeptically. He couldn't imagine the immaculate Karen Wheeler being jealous of the less than immaculate Joyce Byers.

"She'd never admit it, but think about it: Your mom and Hopper have been happy together- she and my Dad have never been an affectionate couple; you, El, and Jonathan all like spending time with her; all over her grandchildren including the ones she shares with my mom all like spending time with her; and she even has a great relationship with Sara," said Mike as he counted on his fingers.

"That makes sense," said Will. "You know, Julie and I were just discussing having a talk with her aunt and uncle about not being jerks just because they're old. We can include your parents and let you and El have the floor to say your piece."

"Deal," said Mike. He took another sip of the hot chocolate, turned

around, leaned his back on the porch railing and stared thoughtfully inside the house. His mouth curled into a small smile.

"What are you thinking about now?" asked Will.

"I was just wondering how many people stay best friends with the person they met on the swings the first day of kindergarten well into adulthood- for the rest of our lives, I'm sure."

"Probably a few," said Will.

"I still think it's the best thing I've ever done," said Mike.

"Still? Mike you've done a lot of great things since then: including marrying and having children with my sister."

"Yeah, I've had a pretty great life. Everything great in my life happened because you said yes to being my friend- Everything." That was true. Mike had felt completely alone in his life before Will became his friend. The loneliness was the thing he remembered the most vividly about his earliest years.

"Well, it's still the best thing I've ever done too," said Will. "Now let's go give a nice lecture to the tactless members of our families."

"I'm ready for that," said Mike.